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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 000623

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TAGS: IS LE PGOV PREL PTER SY

SUBJECT: LEBANON: MARCH 14 ATTEMPTS TO COUNTER AOUN'S NEW INITIATIVE

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey D. Feltman. Reason: Section 1.4 (b)

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SUMMARY

¶1. (C) Two founding members of the pro-reform March 14th movement expressed genuine concern that FPM leader Michel Aoun's shewd proposal to select Lebanon's next president by direct elections has to be effectively countered -- and soon. MP Samir Franjieh and former MP Fares Souaid argued that the danger with Aoun's progressive-sounding proposal is that it would completely overturn the 1989 Taif Agreement, which ended the country's civil war and guarantees a strong political voice for what they perceive as a beleaguered Christian community. In their view, the Aoun gambit is part of an overall destabilizing campaign being directed from Damascus and Tehran through their two primary proxies: Michel Aoun and Hassan Nasrallah. In response, Franjieh and Souaid are trying to convince their March 14th colleagues to enlist the support of both the Maronite Patriarch and the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) to compel adherence to the Taif Agreement and the country's constitution. The well-respected political leaders also plan to come up with a clear declaration of principles, as well as a political vision for the Lebanon's future, to counter a growing public sense that March 14th is merely reactive in nature, and lacks the initiative and creativity needed to solve the country's numerous problems. End summary.

¶2. (C) Veteran supporter of democracy and Lebanese sovereignty MP Samir Franjieh, who is a close relation (but no friend) to influential pro-Syrian former Minister Suleiman Franjieh, and former MP Fares Souaid met with the Ambassador and Special Assistant on May 2 at the Embassy. The previous day, former general Michel Aoun had announced at a rally of enthusiastic FPM supporters that Lebanon's next president should be elected by direct vote, rather than the constitutionally-mandated election in Parliament. Even though a direct election of the president was contrary to the constitution and the almost-sacrosanct Taif Agreement, both Franjieh and Souaid were deeply concerned that Aoun's proposal would resonate with part of (read: FPM supporters and Hizballah) Lebanon's anxious electorate. Therefore, an immediate and effective response was imperative.

THE PATRIARCH AND THE ARMY

¶3. (C) Although he acknowledged that decisive, coordinated action was not a particular strength of the March 14th

coalition, Fares Souaid outlined a comprehensive response that he believed would be quickly accepted by the alliance's diverse members. The key objective of his plan would be to enlist the unambiguous support of Maronite Patriarch Boutros Sfeir and LAF leadership in reaffirming the primacy of the constitution and Taif. Coincidentally, Souaid said that Patriarch Sfeir has recently become noticeably more supportive of Lebanon's reform movement and argued that this trend should be encouraged and focused as much as possible. He suggested that the Vatican, which enjoys considerable influence with the cleric, should be asked to encourage Sfeir to be even more outspoken, specifically in defense of the constitution and the right of the parliamentary majority to select the country's next president.

¶4. (C) Souaid, with agreement from Franjieh, also argued it was necessary to quietly, but firmly, make clear to LAF's leadership that developments which threatened the constitution, such as President Emile Lahoud thinly-veiled threat to name an illegal second government when his term ends, would not be tolerated. Souaid noted that even though Lebanon's military leaders -- specifically naming DefMin Elias Murr, LAF Commander Michel Sleiman and LAF Intelligence Chief General George Khoury -- could not make public political declarations, they could effectively support the Patriarch and the constitutional process behind the scenes. (Note: Souaid made particular reference to Gen. George Khoury (who will soon visit Washington) as an influential and trusted friend of the Patriarch and a person to whom careful attention should be paid. He described Khoury as an ambitious, but honest soldier, from a middle class background, who views himself as a natural successor to Gen. Sleiman. He also said that although Khoury has stayed relatively neutral in the political flux of the past two years, Souaid is quite confident his sympathies are with the

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reform movement. A mitigating factor, however, is that Khoury hails from a Biqa' Valley town traditionally under heavy Syrian influence. End note.)

SEARCHING FOR ADDITIONAL SUPPORT

¶5. (C) Souaid indicated the second objective of his strategy is to sway vulnerable Members of Parliament who are on the margins of the March 8th coalition, namely MP Michel Murr (Greek Orthodox from the Metn) and MP Elie Skaff (Catholic from Zahleh), to create anxiety in the opposition's camp. Both Murr and Skaff have their own popular base of support, meaning that they are not as heavily reliant on Aoun as others. Souaid also stated that they would continue to try to convince moderate Aounists, such as MP Farid el-Khazen and Ghassan Moukheiber, that their best chance for future political viability rests with the majority. But he acknowledged the Aounists, whatever they may say in private, have maintained notable solidarity in public, and barring a colossal error by Aoun, does not believe that stance will change.

¶6. (C) Finally, echoing suggestions made by the Ambassador for months, Souaid said he would urge his March 14th colleagues to finally establish a policy planning cell for the notoriously disorganized alliance. Franjieh noted that following March 14th's usual spur-of-the-moment meetings, the resulting communiqus are more often than not hastily drafted and delivered by a confusing array of disparate personalities. And then, he admitted with frustration, nothing is done to maintain either message momentum or continuity. He acknowledged the up-to-now amateurish handling of the pro-reform message had to be improved or they would risk losing the critical support of the electorate.

¶7. (C) Interestingly, Franjieh stated his firm belief that March 14th's popular support has increased the past few months. (Note: This position contradicts the reaction that

the Embassy has heard from numerous non-affiliated, but pro-democratic Lebanese that there is growing frustration with the lack of progress on both political and economic reforms, and a sense that the clear momentum of Paris III may have been squandered. End note.) Responding to our skepticism, Franjieh maintained that Lebanon's pro-reform voters understand the severe challenges posed by Hizballah, and its allies Michel Aoun and Speaker Nabih Berri, and would stick with March 14th. But he also admitted the lack of a clear declaration of principles and an appealing democratic vision for Lebanon's future is badly needed -- and would be addressed.

¶18. (C) In closing, Souaid urged the Ambassador to consult with Walid Jumblatt, Saad Hariri and PM Siniora to listen to and heed their advice. Franjieh concurred with his friend and remarked that Lebanon's future could well be determined in the next few months -- the anticipated establishment of the Special Tribunal, the unknown reaction of Syria to that development, and the outcome of the presidential election this fall would in large measure settle the question of Lebanon's identity and sovereignty.

FELTMAN